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THE MAN WHO BOUGHT MARS

By John Russell Fearn

(Writing as POLTON CROSS)

Hal Bailey bought Mars although it seemed worthless. But then he slept for a century and a half ...

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"Two-hundred dollar stake in a planet that's as dry as a textbook! Are you crazy, buddy?"
Hal Bailey shook his head at the question.

"Nope, I'm not crazy; no telling when Mars might pay dividends. Just make out the claim and give me a receipt. I'm just back from a trip out there, and even red sand will sell at a price."

"Not in 1970, pal. Still, it's your funeral."

Hal took the receipt handed to him, smiled gravely as he left the Space Corporation Building. People glanced at him curiously as he walked along. He knew he looked odd, attired in rough, dirty space slacks, a lump of gray mineral rock under one arm. His face was masked in its good humored cleanness by a bristling stubble. He looked, and felt, all washed up from his personal trip in an old space can as far as Mars and back.

Anyway, it had been worth it. Something queer about the rock he had found. Emanations. Probably valuable to the authorities. And his two-hundred dollar stake on the ocher planet secured things.

He nodded as he thought his deal over—then all of a sudden every thought was dashed and blinded out of his brain by a terrific blow on the head—He pitched into a darkness blacker than space.

"Centuries have passed, and you now own Mars," they told Hal Bailey when he awoke, "but it's worthless." Then why did they want to buy it?

Hal stirred uneasily, conscious of awakening life. It was a queer sensation, quite unlike a normal awakening from stupor. It was more like gradual recovery from cramp in which his limbs merged from leaden uselessness into warmth and feeling. Threaded through his mind was the fading memory of wandering afar off; a conviction that he had accomplished much while yet being unaware of doing it—

He opened his eyes abruptly and gazed mystifiedly about him.

Hospital? Possibly. Morgue? No, sir! Cemetery—? But no; there were men's faces watching him—earnest and respectful faces. There were six. Hal's eyes went round a room of immense proportions scattered with endless, non-paned ceiling-floor windows. Light—light and more light. It poured in on him from everywhere.

What he saw through the windows made him awaken thoroughly, and with it came a certain fear. New York, as he had known it anyway, had gone! In its place reposed a metropolis of breath-taking size rearing into the blue summer sky. Skyscrapers, bridges, street cars, radio towers, aircraft—As far as the eye could see.

"Holy cats!" he gasped suddenly, rising up. "What happened—?"

He stopped, looking down at himself self-consciously. He was dressed in a light smock which covered him from head to toe. He realized now that he had been lying on a bed of vacuum cushions, electrically heated from below. His body felt

saggy from disuse. He was shaved, however, his hair was brushed, and his nails manicured.

"This," said one of the men gravely, looking at Hal with piercing gray eyes, "is indeed a momentous day! Helgis"—he glanced at one of the other men—"inform the Publicity Bureau."

Hal watched the man go, then moistened his lips.

"Say, what goes on?" he asked uneasily. "How'd I get here? Who was the guy that socked me out in the street?"

"Socked you? Oh—you mean your assailant of long ago? I am afraid we have no idea...."

"No idea?" Hal looked more worried than ever. "And what do you mean by 'long ago?' How long have I been unconscious anyway?"

The man with gray eyes looked at his companions momentarily, then as they nodded he answered gravely:

"One hundred and fifty years. We had no idea when you would wake up—if at all. It became clear long ago that a curious pathological condition was—"

"Damn the pathology!" Hal exploded, scrambling off the bed. "You said a hundred and fifty years! You don't mean it! You *can't* mean it! Why dammit, it only feels like an hour ago—"

He stopped, breathing hard. He stood passive as an unemotional servant threw a robe about him.

"This," said the man with gray eyes, "is the year 2120, and you, Excellent Friend, have been the medical wonder of the past years. As record has it you were attacked in 1970 and taken to the hospital with a fractured skull. From there, your condition being one of slight body movement without actual recovery of consciousness, you were taken to the Medical Wing of the State Museum. Through the years, as your wealth was used by State trustees, you became the especial care of principal medicoes in this residence. We have eagerly awaited your return to consciousness, have spent our lives studying you. The day has come ... My name, Excellent Friend, is Nilicot."

Hal stared for a while, then rubbed his head. "You—you said something about wealth?"

"Yes, Excellent Friend. At a rough estimate you are worth some hundred million croni—dollars as you used to call them. Your other possessions include half of this city, the planet Mars—Is something the matter?" Nilicot broke off anxiously, as Hal staggered.

"No—no." Hal sat down on the bed again with a thud. "I'm just kinda dizzy.... I'd like something to eat and drink."

"Of course! Forgive my lack of attention ..."

Nilicot turned to the wall and pressed a variety of buttons. Trays guided on radio beams shot through the wall's unseen hatches and came to rest in mid air at the level of Hal's lap. There they remained. With bulging eyes he stared down at the perfect food awaiting him—then with a hopeless shrug he picked up knife and fork and started.

Suddenly one of the men in the group, a bulldog-faced man in a tight blue one-piece suit went into detail. His voice and brain were like those of a robot for accuracy.

"In 1970 you staked a claim with the Space Corporation for a strip of territory on Mars encompassing Cynia Oasis. You became unconscious before you could make good your claim, thereby establishing a precedent in law because you were neither dead nor alive and your claim still held good. By the law of progressive land interest holdings your claim doubled in three years. Experts viewed Mars and decided it was of no particular value to us ... In a hundred years your claim entitled you to three quarters of the planet. Now ..." The man took a deep breath. "Now, Excellent Friend, you own Mars!"

Hal looked up and smiled weakly.

"Think of that! Is there anything else?"

"Decidedly. Your space machine was found and disposed of by the State. The auctioned money was placed in the bank for you in the form of investments. The investments realized enormous sums after the Scientific War of 2050 and it ended as you are today, with ownership of half this city and a bank account of some hundred million croni. You are a wealthy

man, Excellent Friend—wealthy even for this age of finance incarnate."

"Yeah ... seems I am." Hal got slowly to his feet, went to the window. "And when I got laid out I was a no account space-hogger. I've got the wealth—but I've lost everything, gentlemen! I've lost the girl I was going to marry, my friends, my ideals, everything. I have been pitchforked into an incredible world way ahead of me ..."

He fell silent, staring out on the gigantic enigma of the city.

"You will accustom yourself," said the bulldog financier gravely. "If I can help you at any time my name is Dagnam. I'm Treasurer for the City."

"Thanks. I'll remember that ..." Hal looked at the others. "I just recall something. When I was laid out I was carrying a chunk of mineral rock. Anybody know what became of it?"

"Mineral rock?" repeated Nilicot. "From where?"

"From—That doesn't matter," Hal said briefly. "I want to know if there's any record of it having been used? Any record of the theft?"

"Not that we know of," Nilicot said.

Hal compressed his lips. Then he asked:

"Just why *did* I go into a trance for one hundred and fifty years? Anybody know?"

"You have confounded medical science. The blow dulled your brain and yet did not kill you. It was as though you moved into some other Time-continuum—"

"And that's the best explanation you advanced scientists have to offer?" Hal demanded.

The men shrugged and glanced at each other. Financier Dagnam said softly:

"Decidedly!"

Hal shrugged.

"Okay, I'll have to accept it—until I know better, anyway. Seems to me I've a lot to catch up on ..."

It took Hal some time to even begin to adjust himself to the altered, advanced conditions. The city seemed to work like clock-work. Everything he wanted in this immense residence was there for him. Servants without end passed silently up and down the long marble corridors of the place. Robot controls were everywhere; teleplates brought the world to his side.

At first it was amusing, thrilling, staggering—by turns. But Hal Bailey was no mug and the vital issues of his interrupted life insisted on being dealt with. On the seventh day he summoned an astronomical expert.

"Of just how much value is Mars?" Hal asked the man.

"Of no value at all, Excellent Friend. The pity is that you staked your claim on a planet since proven so useless to science. You own it of course; by law nobody can touch it—but State examinations on your behalf have shown it has no useful mineral or other yields. Its only value lies in it being useful as a refueling station for long distance space flights."

"Would you suggest," Hal asked slowly, "that I sell Mars?"

The astronomer shrugged.

"Why not? A planet of red dust is no use to you. The Government would make you an offer. If that does not come up to expectations try the city control—Dagnam is the Treasurer."

"Okay ... Thanks."

Hal sat in thought for a while, face grim—then he pressed a teleplate button. The Secretary of State appeared on the mirror.

Hal said, "Mr. Secretary, Mars is in the market for sale. What is the Government offer?"

"For the past twenty-five years it has remained at one thousand croni—"

"What! A thousand smackers for a whole planet? And of huge value as a fuel station—"

"That is the figure," said the Secretary implacably. "I am only the mouthpiece of the State, Excellent Friend. I am not in a position to enforce you to—"

"You bet you're not!" Hal switched off, pressed another button. Bulldog-faced Dagnam merged in view.

"Ah, Excellent Friend, good morning! I—"

"Listen, Dagnam, if I decide to sell Mars to the city what's the price?"

"Basic figure of forty fifty thousand croni, open to adjustment."

"Hm-m..." Hal's eyes gleamed. "Well, thanks. I'll do some hard thinking..."

He switched off, thought out loud. "If Dagnam will pay that and the Government won't it looks as though Dagnam is responsible for whatever jiggery-pokery is going on behind the scenes. So Mars is not valuable, eh? That's what they think! Seems to me I can't do better than go and look that real estate over a little more thoroughly. I might find something."



CHAPTER II

22nd Century Racketeer

In ten minutes Hal was in his private solar car driving at a smooth 500 m.p.h. down the elevated city track to the space grounds.^[A] As he drove he meditated, still none too certain of the setup in which he had landed. To own a planet was one thing: to be sure how much others knew about it was another.

He glanced up suddenly at his rear mirror as he heard a roar behind him. In the mirror was a powerful black solar car striving to overtake him. To move out of his single car track was impossible.

Then his alarm abated and he grinned. Of course! These cars were not like 1970. They moved in a fixed groove and the black car was on the faster track anyway. He waited for it to overtake him.

It drew level. Momentarily he caught a glimpse of men's faces, then a tiny pellet sailed through the air and struck his car engine amidship. Instantly the world seemed to burst into a fiery confusion of flying metal and flame. Wheel brakes screamed wildly and frantically, working automatically as the engine failed.

Hal felt himself flying through the air, hair and eyebrows singed with the flame from the engine. He struck out desperately, clamped his fingers more by luck than judgment to the guard rail bordering the track. He hung on, feet dangling, cast a look below him. His brain reeled. A thousand feet down yawned the chasms of the city's power-parks—His fingers slipped—

Then suddenly strong hands were gripping him, hauling him up to safety.

"You—you came just in time, I guess," he panted, rubbing his racked arms and gazing at the grim faces of the traffic police. "I was attacked by somebody—"

"We saw it, Excellent Friend," the officer replied. "From our guardhouse down the track. It was an attempt to stop your car with an atomic bomb—probably a kidnaping racket. Have no fear, we'll get them."

"You'd better!" Hal's jaws tightened. "Somebody seems to have marked objections to my knocking around—Okay, I'm all right now. Give me a lift to the space grounds, will you?"

They did, saw him safely into the private one-man express machine he chartered. Thoroughly convinced now that he had stepped into a hornets' nest of intrigue somewhere, Hal set the controls and drove swiftly over the heights of the city, flashed outward into the void. Turning, he set his course for Mars, eyed it grimly.

"Useless planet, huh? And the moment I set out for it I nearly get bumped off! Guess that residence of mine must be wormeaten with secret devices and somebody knew what I'd planned. You've things to learn, big boy. This 2120 racket is no nursery!"

He half expected as his journey continued that there would be some other attack—but nothing happened. Here and there the space patrol signaled a greeting; far behind was a leisurely old space-tramp pursuing the usual lanes ... otherwise nothing.

Part of the time Hal slept, using the robot control. Then as Mars began to fill heaven with its streaking *canali* he was aware of considerable surprise at sighting a lone spaceship perched in the void perhaps two hundred miles from the red planet. As he drew nearer he opened up his space radio.

"Hallo, there! What goes on? Who are you?"

To his surprise a girl's voice answered—a cool, charming voice.

"Who wants to know?"

Hal frowned, then his jaw set. He drove alongside the solitary craft and saw a face framed in the outlook port. So far as he could make out it was a good looking face, oval, framed in black hair.

"You're inside the five hundred mile zone limit," he announced curtly. "That makes you a space trespasser on my

property—"

"Your property! Who are you anyway?"

"I'm Hal Bailey, owner of Mars. If that doesn't convey anything try 'Excellent Friend.'"

"You're—you're him are you?" He heard her gasp. "Excuse *me!* I can explain this ... Come on over."

She opened her ship's outer lock. Hal lowered his space-tunnel into position, crossed into the girl's control room.^[B] The place was littered with spectrometers, charts, maps, sextants, and Martian desert drawings. The girl was a slim, cool-looking piece attired in the prevailing space slacks of the time.

"What's the idea?" Hal inquired, eyeing her steadily.

Instead of answering she said,

"Yes, you're the Excellent Friend, all right. I've seen you enough times in the Museum. The Medical Wonder! The owner of Mars himself—Well, I'm trespassing all right, only it was quiet and empty of space police so I—" She shrugged. "So I just went on with my work."

"Spying for those damned folks back on Earth who are trying to kill me?" Hal asked bitterly. "Like the rest of these chiseling heels of 2120 you're—"

"I resent that!" she cried, her dark eyes blazing. "I'm no spy! I'm a student of cosmic hieroglyphics. Vilma Crandal is the name. You've heard of me, or my dad?"

"Frankly, no." Hal frowned. "Sorry I offended you. Space hieroglyphics? What's that to do with you being near my property?"

She nodded to the table, indicated the numberless drawings of Mars.

"Mars changes its canals a lot. You know that?"

"Sure. Alter all the time. So what?"

"My dad believed, and I believe, that the Martians used the canal system not for water but to convey a message to Earth. Their language being different to ours they used the only method understandable to scientists anywhere—geometry."

Hal stared at her, then he grinned. "Sounds screwy to me—"

"It isn't screwy!" she objected heatedly. "Evan Lowell, way back in your dim past hinted at it. Every week more or less, for centuries, the Martian *canali* undergo change in length and design, appear and disappear. The Martians knew exactly what changes would occur in the surface of their planet for generations after their decease and arranged it that the canals fell into predetermined shapes—geometrical shapes. Those shapes, traced back into the past, and followed to the present day, spell a message—an amazing message. My father and I made it our life's work to solve the meaning of it."

Hal stared down on the other planet. "But hang it, those marks don't even make sense!"

"Neither does shorthand until you understand it. Geometry is a language all its own—the science of magnitudes. If you take the propositions postulated by the canal designs you arrive at logical conclusions. For instance, two parallel lines of same length and distance apart mean, obviously, the term 'Equal.' That's how it works ..."

The girl stopped a moment, added seriously,

"Upward of ninety years Dad and I studied Mars. From the propositions we've learned how much Mars really contains, what a mastery of science the extinct Martians really had—Even today Mars contains vast scientific power deep in its bowels. They couldn't send messages to Earth by radio because at that time—when the Martians died out—Earth was not fully aware of radio power. Possibly nobody on the Earth has made cosmic hieroglyphics their specialty as Dad and I have. That is why I'm here, checking notes."

Hal rubbed his jaw.

"Perhaps there *are* others in on it," he said slowly. "It may account for certain factions trying to get Mars from me at all

possible cost—"

He stopped and twirled around as the radio speaker came to life.

"Hey, there, Excellent Friend, we want a word with you! You'd better agree since we have your ship covered."

Hal looked grimly through the window onto the dirty space tramp he had seen following him for long enough.

"State your business!" he snapped into the mike.

"Withdraw that airlock tunnel then we will."

"Better," the girl said seriously. "I've no protective weapons on this ship. If these guys get tough, whoever they are, they'll make it hot for us."

She broke the magnetic contact holding the tunnel to Hal's ship and it folded back in place. The tramp drifted alongside, fanned out its own tunnel, then three men came into the control room. The foremost was Financier Dagnam. Behind him were two men with paralyzing guns in their hands at the ready.

"Surprised?" the financier asked dryly, then before Hal could reply he went on, "You shouldn't be. Way out in space here I am not compelled to cloak my actions as I was on Earth, surrounded as you were by laws, scientists, and state officials. You're a free man here and can take your chance ..." He stopped, his piggy eyes glinting. "Not long ago I made you an offer for Mars. You will be well advised to accept it!"

"So it was you who tried to kill me on the traffic way!" Hal exploded. "I might have—"

"My orders were to have you kidnaped," Dagnam said curtly. "The scheme went wrong and the police intervened. It has meant my being forced to follow you out here to get you to sell Mars to me. You have no use for it—"

"Who says I haven't? Get the hell out of here, Dagnam, before I damn well—"

"Let us not waste time," the financier interrupted coldly. He planked a printed sheet down on the table, fingered a pen grimly. "On Earth," he said slowly, "I might have been forced to actually pay you the money stated—but not here. You will sign, because I have the guns."

"Supposing I let you shoot me instead?" Hal demanded grimly.

"That won't happen, my friend. You have placed yourself in a rather unfortunate position. Either you sign or this woman here dies, and her death will be on your conscience."

Hal hesitated and looked at the guns. He glanced at the girl and saw she was giving little shakes of her head.

"It's a wonder a snake like you doesn't sink to forgery," Hal said bitterly, eyeing Dagnam's remorseless face.

"I'm not above it," he shrugged. "Only back on Earth you have signed too many documents since you awoke for me to escape with a forgery—Sign, damn you!" he blazed. "You're wasting time!"

Hal tightened his lips, then bent down to the table, apparently to append his signature—Instead he suddenly whirled up the heavy brass sextant with which the girl had been working and hurled it with terrific, unerring force at the nearest gunman.

He fell to the floor, dead-stunned as the instrument struck him a glancing blow on top of the head and then whizzed on its way into the switchboard. There was a violent purple flash—

Even as the missile traveled on its way Hal jumped, brought the startled other man down with a tackle, hurled his massive fist into his upturned face time and again until he sank back with bleeding mouth, his gun flying out of his hand.

Instantly the girl picked it up, tossed it over to Hal. He caught it deftly.

"Out!" he said between his teeth. "Go on, Dagnam—get out! And take your infernal paper with you—!" He hurled it in the magnate's flabby, vindictive face. Dagnam clutched it, crammed it in his pocket and headed for the airlock. A kick helped him on his way.

Without ceremony Hal bundled the two dazed and battered gunmen after him, fired one charge from the gun that sent them

scuttling through the rest of the airlock tunnel back to their own ship.

"Okay, we get outa here," Hal said briefly to the girl, slamming the lock shut. "That ship of mine doesn't signify anyway ..."

The girl closed a switch and the ship jolted—then she gave a cry of alarm.

"The switch! It's broken—Where the sextant hit it!"

Hal leaped to her side, stared at the smashed wiring.

"What—what happens?" he gulped.

"It fires the forward tubes. If those don't fire as well as the back jets we'll never pull free of Mars' gravity field—we're falling now!" the girl cried hoarsely, as the ship moved a little way and then began to twirl oddly, moving slowly down toward the vast ocher landscape below. With seconds whipping by, it gathered momentum.

Hal felt himself sweat with sudden fear. He set to work to try and replace the wiring, gave it up as hopeless. It would take hours. The girl cut off the power, but the damage was done now. Faster and faster the ship fell out of the anchor-field over the deadline and the ocher wilderness rose to meet them.

The girl tensed, biting her lip—then almost at the limit of their headlong dive she gave the rearward tubes everything they had. In that maneuver she succeeded for the ship twirled and lifted her nose sideways, struck the sand in a long gouging sweep, tore along in it for a space, then halted.

"Nice going!" Hal breathed, straightening up.

The girl gave a relieved nod. "Thought that last bit might do it. What we have to do now is fix this wiring and then—"

"It can wait," Hal said, looking through the port. "Dagnam and his boys are heading voidwards; evidently think we went to destruction. Now we've landed on this darned planet of mine I want to be sure exactly why Dagnam is so anxious about it. Is it that he knows of Martian secrets buried in it, or is it the secret I once found—? How much do you know of Mars' surface, Miss Crandal?"

"From personal contact, nothing. Private property, remember."

Hal grinned crookedly.

"Pity other people haven't your sense of honesty. Let's see—" He studied the gages. "Air thin but breathable, just. Temperature seventy. Hm-m, good enough. And we're three miles from the spot I want—Cynia Oasis. Okay, lock that stuff of yours away in case unwelcome factions find it—"

"I'll take the principal charts with me," she said briefly. "If Dagnam returns I'll leave nothing from which he can benefit."

She stuffed a collapsible roll of prints and charts into the belt pocket on her waist, then nodded to the airlock. Hal gripped the solitary paralyzer-gun more firmly and followed her.

CHAPTER III

Slow Motion Life

As they ploughed along together through the sand, accustoming themselves to the lesser gravity, Hal said,

"Look here, Miss Crandal—or is it Vilma now we know each other better?—you know plenty about Earth whereas I was just flung into it. What's the setup? I mean, who's supposed to rule the cities and the countries?"

"In every country save Merica—that's where you and I hail from—money alone is in control," she answered.

"Capitalism won the fight after the Scientific War, except in our country. There we have the Presidential form of Government, with finance striving hard to overthrow it. Dagnam is one of those who is trying to oust a political Government and set up a monetary one, like other countries have. If he could only get the wealth he needs—even if only in solid gold—he could rule the country. But gold can only be bought in hard cash from other countries and planets. Therefore the one with most gold is nominally the big shot of the lot."

Hal reflected. "Rather like our Twentieth Century setup used to be, only now it's on clearer lines. Seems to me Dagnam is a guy to be wary of. Obviously he—"

Pausing, he pointed ahead.

"There, that sand and rock ridge. In it there's the entrance to an underground cave. I found it before I went to sleep—Come on."

The girl followed him through a narrow opening in the hard rock, right into the ridge itself, lowered herself down a stony slope into Hal's waiting arms. The dim sunlight filtering in revealed an immense internal cave hanging with numberless stalactites.

"This is it all right," Hal said grimly, as he and the girl fingered the rock inquisitively. "I took some of these stalactite rocks back to Earth. I must have been followed and they were stolen from me. Since nothing's been heard of them since I presume they were no good...."

"What did you think they were, anyway?" the girl asked.

"My instruments said heavy water crystals.^[C] The rock gives off emanations, I know that. I carried my samples in steel tongs at arms' length until I felt sure they wouldn't hurt me. On Earth I carried them under my arm."

A startled look began to form on the girl's face.

"But heavy water crystals might be valuable—for all kinds of things! They arrest metabolism for one thing—that is age. In concentrate form they can be powerful drugs. Heavy water crystals is right!" she went on. "Martian water would be electrolyzed by the weak atmospheric blanket, would sink down here from the oasis in heavy water form ... Maybe Dagnam knows a thing or two, at that!"

"Mebbe ..." Hal was wandering thoughtfully around the cave. He came up suddenly against the opposite wall and gave a shout.

"Hey, Vil! For Pete's sake come and take a look here!"

Hurrying to his side the girl started in surprise at discovering an inlet square of immensely thick glass. But beyond the glass was yet another cavern, furnished incredibly enough after the style of a hospital ward! There were earthly tables, chairs, instruments, beds, and a dully glowing ceiling lamp, apparently of radium origin, allowing just sufficient light for visibility.

This was not all. In the place were six men, Earthmen, clad in light one-piece tunics. They lay or sat in all manner of positions, motionless apparently. Some were bald, and all were over middle age.

"What—what *is* this?" Hal gasped. "Business man's waxworks?"

"Good Lord, I know some of these men, by sight!" Vilma cried. "There's Millpont, the famous financier, for one—And Valcane, the big broker!" Her voice broke with excitement. "And that fat man there is DeManyon, about the biggest chain store merchant in Merica—Wait, something comes back to me! While you were asleep Hal all these men here announced their intention of retiring. Then they dropped out of sight—to *here*, obviously!"

"Are they dead?" Hal stared in bewilderment.

They were silent for a while, watching intently. It seemed too incredible, but with the moments the men were seen to alter position very slightly, an alternation as infinitesimal as the movement of the distant stars.

"No, they're not dead," the girl whispered. "They're *slowed down!*"

"Men in slow motion!" Hal breathed. "Now I begin to see the light! This is Dagnam's doing! I told you that heavy water rock gives off emanations. Way back in the past it was stolen from me, probably by some predecessor of Dagnam's. They found out that it was the emanations of the rock that made me sleep for a hundred and fifty years. *That's* what the explanation is. Those guys closest to me back on Earth, like Nilicot my adviser, knew all about it—But Dagnam kept them quiet. Probably they figured I'd never wake up—"

"Then these men—?" the girl asked breathlessly.

"It's obvious! Dagnam, or somebody before him, traced the stuff back to this cave. They used it, probably as concentrate. Of their own accord these men here have been dosed with concentrate. They may not wake up for centuries. Suppose they left behind them certain investments to accrue with time—? When they wake up they'll be as incredibly wealthy—wealthier—than I found myself! You say they only retired. Okay—their holdings remain firm until they reappear or death can be proved. A racket!" Hal whistled. "A sanatorium for businessmen! Financial power in pickle! Wow!"

"You recovered, proved obstinate, so Dagnam's got to get this planet from you at all cost," the girl mused. "Yes, I believe you are right. And he relied on the general honesty of other people to keep this place secret—and it's worked! We—"

She stopped, suddenly staggered a little.

"Something wrong?" Hal caught her anxiously.

"Just—just darned sleepy, that's all." She looked vaguely surprised. "I guess it must be this thin air—"

She shook herself, yawned widely, then stopped half way and swung to the cave opening at a sudden sound. Three figures dropped into view—Dagnam and his two gunmen. Instantly Hal's hand flew to the gun he'd thrust in his belt but Dagnam's voice rang out.

"Better not, Bailey! I'm in no mood for games this time!"

Dagnam came forward with a grim face, halted.

"Good job we watched what happened through the telescope after your ship cracked up," he commented briefly. "Right now you know just a bit too much about my affairs ..." His cold eyes slanted to the girl as he thrust out the sheet of paper Hal had hurled at him on the spaceship. "This time I'll take no chances. Sign! That is all I need. You can talk yourself black proving otherwise back on Earth. I'll have you taped by then—Come on, Bailey, sign! Or this girl dies. I'm no joker!"

"I'll be—" Hal checked himself, suddenly conscious of a vast wave of weariness billowing over him. He fought against it with all his strength as for a moment Dagnam and his gunmen seemed to recede into a distant mist.

"*Get busy!*" the financier roared, holding out a pen.

Furious, he lunged out with his fist, sent Hal spinning to the sandy floor. Hal fought his way up again, trying to figure out what had gone wrong with him. Life seemed to be ebbing from him in a tide. He hardly felt the brutal blows Dagnam rained time and again into his face. Only his dinning command—"Sign!" penetrated his brain.

Numbly, he took the pen. With the cave spinning round him he scrawled his signature, twisted his head to stare at the girl where she was held against the wall at the gunpoint.

"Okay," Dagnam said briefly. "Pay the account, boys. Use the ordinary revolvers—no taking chances with paralysis or rays."

Hal jerked his head up in alarm as the gunmen backed away. Half-way back up the cave they paused, leveled their guns and fired—once, twice ...

Hal stared in blank horror as he saw the girl crumple in a limp heap to the floor. Then to the accompaniment of another gun explosion he felt a dull, numb pain in his chest.

His exhaustion was complete. Darkness flowed over him.

Throughout a period of duration he could only guess at, Hal was aware of slight movements, of patched-up events as brief and odd as those of a nightmare. In a half-formed way they reminded him of his one hundred fifty-year sleep. Then all of a sudden he recovered consciousness.

Once more that feeling of receding cramp, of life pouring back into his limbs. Hunger gripped him.

He sat up abruptly, blinking in the wavering glow of volcanic light. He was in some kind of inner cave that went as far as he could see. In every direction sprouted bushes of livid green, their branches laden with heavy, vivid-colored fruits like peaches. It was cool down here; the air sucked into the planet's core, was fresh. The plants, dry soil specimens, flourished obviously by absorbing what water vapor remained in the air.

"What the heck...?" Hal rubbed his face, noted in amazement the vast beard he had grown. His hair too was down to his shoulders.

He stared around him again, then started as he saw the sprawled figure of the girl stirring slightly. At the same moment, seeing her threadbare clothes, he became aware that he himself was in tatters. For some reason his tough space togs were worn out. He made hasty readjustments to what remained then scrambled dizzily to his feet.

"Vilma!" he cried, shaking her bare shoulder. "Vil, wake up!"

She moved again at that, opened her eyes. For a long time she looked bemusedly around, then as her faculties returned she scooped her torn clothes more tightly about her and stared at Hal's bearded face.

"What—what happened?" she breathed.

"Search me," he replied worriedly. "Last thing I remember was being shot at. Dunno how we got here ... Up you get!"

He raised her to her feet, then he felt his chest thoughtfully.

"Right here," he said slowly, "is something hard. It must be the bullet Dagnam's gunman fired at me—You should have a couple in you somewhere."

"I have," she said, fingering herself. "They ought to have killed us—but they didn't! I seem to remember I was half asleep—Hal, what's happened to us? Where are we on Mars?" She caught at him anxiously.

"Something has happened that I hardly dare think about," he said in an awed voice. "We made a mistake in handling those heavy water stalactites as we did. The emanations must have gotten into our bloodstream and slowed down our faculties—just as it happened to me before when I was fool enough to carry the rock without protection. The bullets didn't kill us because death relies on the speed at which a shock can be assimilated. With us the shock was infinitely protracted, so we didn't die ..."

"We moved," he breathed, astounded. "We followed Nature's law and looked subconsciously for stimulant. We needed precious little, but still *some*. As if in a stupor we must have moved from our cave to here ... Here there is fruit. If we follow our trail back we'll no doubt come to our cave—"

"From our clothes and your Rasputin beard, it's some time," Vilma said. "Let's take a look."

Hal turned to the nearest fruit bush, snapped off a partly dried branch and thrust it in the volcanic flame spouting out of the rocks. Thus armed with a torch they searched around until they found a small single opening. It led through a long tunnel with a sandy floor.

"Notice?" Hal exclaimed, triumphantly. "Gouged tracks in the sand where we've dragged ourselves along with infinite slowness. Blind animal instinct replacing normal reasoning, as it naturally must if the faculties are slowed up."

The girl nodded but said nothing. Hal realized that, like him, she was oppressed by the awesome thought of the time that must have slipped by in the interval.

For an hour they went on, twisting and turning through the single narrow passage.

It brought them out finally into the very cave where they had met the bullets of Dagnam's gunmen, seemingly so short a time before.

CHAPTER IV

Martian Strategy

Silent, they looked at the wall of the cave where they had last seen illumined glass. Now it was powdered with sandy dust and behind it all was dark and quiet.

"They've gone," Hal said, shrugging, then as he looked about him, "And they've taken tons of stalactite material with them! Look at the amount of stuff they've broken off—!"

Vilma nodded slowly, then they went together to the cave exit and stared out onto the Martian night sky. Cold wind blew about them, set them shuddering.

Earth was there over the desert, a tiny green ball. Then as she studied the winking constellations the girl turned suddenly and seized Hal's arm.

"Do you realize how long we've been crawling and eating?" she asked breathlessly.

"Some time, I guess. I can't judge it exactly—"

"I can, from the stars—It's about two hundred years!"

"What!"

"It's right," she insisted seriously. "In all that time we've passed a slow motion existence. We've been veritable lotus eaters. In two hundred years all we've done is move to lower quarters of Mars and eat fruit—"

"But what's happened on Earth during this time?" Hal cried. "Do you realize—"

"I realize that more of the stalactites have been taken, obviously for use by the revived industrialists who by this time must surely be veritable masters of the world. They probably wondered where we went to—That doesn't signify. We're still here, alive ..."

"Yeah, and little good it does us!" Hal stared over the mournfully empty desert. "Either your space ship was taken away long ago or else it's covered in sand. We're alone, Vil—Lost!"

"Not quite," she said quietly. "Don't forget the Martian civilization, or what's left of it, still lies deep inside Mars. I know enough to find my way to it. Original notes are gone of course, but my memory still serves me. Come on, we've got to find a way down to this planet's very core. It's our last chance. There may be stuff there to help us escape."

Together they made their way back to the underground cavern, refreshed themselves with the curious tasting fruit—then they lighted more torches and started a careful exploration. It was not long before the girl found an immense volcanic fissure extending into the depths.

"Okay, let's go." Hal said grimly. "We can't go up so let's go down."

They descended cautiously, slipping down precipitous lengths at times, barking their bare feet on loose pieces of rock, but gradually descending ever lower into the sponge of a world. Down here, as the fissures linked right through the planet, there was a tremendous draft, cold and cutting.

It was also a region of more and more volcanic light from the nearly extinct fires in the core. They flashed and rumbled incessantly but without any promise of becoming dangerous. In the cave in which the two finally dropped—indeed it was far more than a cave, it was the vast root core of Mars itself—there was an awesome quality. Its silence was broken only by the muffled thunder of internal explosion, its darkness by the stabbing lights that threw distorted shadows. And at its far end, gleaming where the light struck it, were two vast doors of black metal.

"This is it!" the girl cried exultantly. "The last habitat of the Martians! In the transcribed message it said thought waves alone can open those doors—the thought wave of the first proposition in Euclid—"

"What a hope!" Hal groaned.

"I think I can do it," the girl retorted. "Maybe you forget I've spent my life—or *did* spend my life—on the problem. Now quit talking and let me concentrate ..."

For a long time she stood staring at the doors, concentrating with brows down. Time and again she failed—then just as Hal was giving it up as hopeless there came out of the rumbling stillness a series of clicking noises. With the creak of untold age the doors began to move, parted up the center, sent forth a belch of curiously exotic air like that from an Eastern tomb.

Within, the atmosphere was breathable but oddly tainted. It clung to the nostrils of Hal and the girl as they stepped cautiously into the hallowed reaches. The reflected light from the volcanic cavern shone on incredibly intricate mechanisms operating the doors.

Silently they went on to a wilderness of machines cloaked in thick, dust-caked grease.

"Yes, this is it," the girl whispered. "The Monte Cristo of Mars—the last inventions of Martian science waiting for those who could read the signs of the *canali*. And we've got them!"

"Yeah ..." Hal felt he had to subdue his voice. "Where do we start?" he went on. "I don't begin to understand the setup. Anyway, there'll be no power—"

"Not of the sort we know of, perhaps—but scientists as clever as the Martians probably used solar power—like we used to use on earth for solar cars two hundred years ago. Let's look around."

An hour later, with the girl's knowledge of advanced machines and Martian signs, they tabulated their findings. All power was clearly governed by an immense self-contained power unit connected with the roof—and thence presumably to some point on the exterior where the sun's power could reach it.

"Telescopic devices, space radio, transmutational machines, synthesis apparatus, the whole shoot—" Hal said.

"All linking to the central switchboard and robot controlled from there," the girl nodded. "Let's see what we get."

Rather nervously she went to work on the switches. It took some time to find the right combination, but fool-proof devices prevented any disastrous mistakes, and suddenly there came a throbbing of power from the immense storage resources.

"It works!" Hal cried excitedly. "Nice going!"

Between them they went to work on the radio television apparatus, fished around for an interval before they transformed the blur on the screen into a view of the heavens, and presently to a picture of Earth perfectly mirrored by the X-ray devices—

It was a changed Earth—a different Earth from anything they had ever known. Where New York had stood there now sprawled a city which covered the entire American continent. New York *was* America, apparently. Across the oceans on other lands reposed similar giant cities, covering every country. They were traced out with roadways and countless lines of communication; the seas were thick with craft, the air jostling with bullet-fast air machines.

"Things have kinda grown," Hal said somberly. "Doesn't get us away from here either. Seems the Martians hadn't mastered space travel in spite of being good scientists—or if they did they took darned good care to leave no clues for us."

The girl fiddled with the radio apparatus, at last got it tuned to an ultra short Earth wavelength. Most of the announcements failed to make much sense, except that there was constant reference to the "grace of the Merica World State." Everything, it appeared, was done by its consent.

"In other words, Merica has got a grip on the whole world and is the dominating State." Hal said thoughtfully. "That kind of adds up. Those industrialists returned, claimed their accumulated money, and thereby became the wealthiest men on Earth, buying everybody else out. Dagnam, we presume, is either dead or in pickle for the future."

Vilma nodded slowly, thinking, then she looked at the radio quickly as another announcement came forth.

"By the grace of the Merica World State it is announced that the appeal for commercial help by the controllers of Europa

State cannot be granted. In these days of financial control, Merica holds the largest gold reserve in the world and is thereby dictator of policy by common consent. The Merica World State, under the control of Exchequer Chancellor Millpont, therefore considers—"

The communication faded out, blurred with space static. Hal switched off, looked at the girl inquiringly.

"Millpont, huh? One of the pickled industrialists who was on Mars here. And the rest will be around him ..." Hal clenched his fist. "It's the very devil! A money juggernaut backed by gold, able to enforce its will on the world until somebody with greater wealth and gold turns up! And what can we do? Nothing! Even if we could get back to Earth we'd be no better off. A bulk of a planet like this—"

"And your own wealth accumulated with two hundred years," the girl pointed out. "Don't forget that! You must by now be enormously wealthy and as long as you are alive the law remains. Not even Millpont can alter that."

"Yeah," Hal sighed. "But still way behind buying him out."

The girl was silent, wandering around the machinery. Then she halted and said slowly. "I *wonder*..."

"Huh? Wonder what?"

"These transmutational machines here," she said slowly—then suddenly making up her mind she closed the transmutator power switches. Giant tubes flared into life for a moment and they both stared in awe at the display, watched the battering onslaught of energies clashing in fiery grandeur in the transparent mutational chamber.

"Anything into anything!" the girl said, studying the hieroglyphics on the chart attached to the machine. "Here there are one hundred elements of which we know only ninety-two—but they're in the same Periodic Weight. That's natural, anyway. And the corresponding switch numbers are shown—Hal!" Her voice sharpened eagerly. "This chart can help us change anything into anything else—lead into gold, for instance. Look, I'll show you!"

She picked up a lead cube from the adjoining container and put it in the transmutational chamber, closed the appropriate switch. A battering hail of complex forces descended on the cube. It began to glow, changed color as it formed fresh atomic units. Automatically the power at last cut itself out and there remained a block that shone dull yellow.

"*Gold!*" Hal yelled. "It is gold! Vil, we've got to contact Earth by radio and tell 'em Millpont isn't the richest power, that this so called hulk of a planet is—"

"And have Millpont see to it that you never use your secret? Oh no!" The girl shook her head. "We fight fire with fire here, Hal. We can't get away from here—so Millpont and sundry others will come to us!"

"Are you crazy?" Hal shouted. "It's asking for it. Once it is known we can manufacture gold *et al* in this place we—"

The girl interrupted him, went across to the radio, began to fiddle for Earth transmission waves again.

"Leave it to me," she said, smiling faintly. "You may be a good space man but you're a rotten business man—" She made more adjustments, intoned her voice into the microphone. "Mars calling Earth! Urgent message! Mars calling Earth!"

After a long interval Earth replied.

The announcer sounded mystified.

"Earth replying. What apparatus are you using to speak from Mars?"

The girl ignored the question.

"Here is a message for the Merica World State, and Chancellor Millpont in particular. Mars is in extreme danger of being annexed by unfriendly powers and it is essential that Chancellor Millpont and the head of every other State in the world come to Mars immediately to determine preventative measures. I am a member of the Space Secret Service, marooned on Mars, and I have discovered this amazing plot. I await reply."

There was a long interval, then,

"Chancellor Millpont concedes to your request, extends his cordial thanks for your promptness. How will he contact you?"

"Cynia Oasis. I will be waiting ..."

The girl switched off, smiled grimly. Hal looked at her in some puzzlement.

"And when he comes?"

"You'll see," she said briefly. "In the meantime we're going to make some clothes with the synthetic machine, hunt up what arms we can to protect ourselves—though I have an idea it won't be necessary—and you're going to tell me the whole story of your life from the time you awoke in 2120 up to meeting me ... Let's get started."

Many Martian days and nights passed before Hal and Vilna, watching from their cave entrance, sighted the approaching Earth fleet. It landed close to the oasis and a party of eight men finally emerged, began to walk toward Hal and Vilna as they signaled their presence.

The bald-headed Millpont stared at the ill-dressed two amazedly.

"Are *you* S.S.S. agents?" he cried. "Or is this some damned joke? If there's been a trick—"

"No trick," Hal said calmly. "Follow us, gentlemen, if you please."

Wonderingly, not a little irritably indeed when it came to the long descent into Mars' bowels, the men followed Hal and the girl. Once in the vast Martian power-hall they gazed around in mystified awe.

Suddenly Millpont harrumphed loudly and cocked a grim eye on the girl.

"Presumably you sent the message," he said. "It was a woman's voice, I am told. Well, where's the danger?"

The girl ignored the inquiry. Composedly, she asked a question.

"Just what countries do you gentlemen represent?"

They looked at each other, then Millpont gestured impatiently.

"There are no countries! You should know that! There are only cities, owned and controlled by the grace of Merica—" He stopped, his jaws setting. "Just what are you two doing on this planet? It is private property and—"

"In other words," the girl said, eyeing the other quiet-faced men, "you are under the heel of this man and his city of Merica?"

There was a slow nodding of heads. One said gravely.

"Financial power backed by gold is the ruler of the Earth, therefore Merica is the legal master."

Vilma smiled crookedly, looked at Millpont.

"What gave you the idea, Millpont, that you own this planet? It was bought—or rather stolen by force—from one Hal Bailey nearly two hundred years or so ago."

"It is on record that it was bought," Millpont retorted. "The Hal Bailey person died or something. Look here, what *is* this?" he roared suddenly. "Why did you ask us here anyway?"

"Shut up, and listen!" Hal was speaking now. "Hal Bailey was one of the richest men in Earth at the time of his supposed death, was he not? Where did his property go? Nobody could use it until his death was proven. That's the law. Right, gentlemen?"

The others nodded again firmly.

"Bailey's death was proved to the hilt!" Millpont snorted. "His property was confiscated by the State then, according to law—"

"Then it's going to be tough on you," Hal said grimly. "I'm Hal Bailey myself, and I can prove it in any way you want

once I get back to Earth! I was robbed, cheated, shot at! I lay for two hundred years with this girl here in slow motion—Yeah, that pricks, doesn't it? Slow motion! Just the way you and your pet industrialists passed the time away while the interest mounted up—"

Millpont hesitated, his eyes glittering.

"You'll never prove anything—and you're not Bailey! You—"

"A moment," one of the men interposed. "It has never been quite understood how Millpont and his colleagues succeeded in gaining such a legal hold over vast sums of money. Do you suggest that they used some scientific method to get a start on us—"

"I'm not suggesting, man—I'm *telling!*" Hal roared. "I own Mars, always have. It was stolen by Dagnam from me. In spite of my signature, in spite of everything, I demand restitution for this! I'll make you pay for this, Millpont! I'll drag the story of heavy water crystals through every damned State on Earth! I'll blast your whole rotten setup! You're going to give me back Mars and my estate in money—But especially Mars! Understand?"

"One moment," Millpont said, calming. "There will be endless difficulties in trying to sort out your legal title to the estate you had two hundred years ago—nor do I believe for a moment you would be able to gainsay the signature you gave making Mars over to us, or at least to Dagnam. Suppose we were to compromise? Suppose I take your word for it regarding Mars and you leave the matter of your accrued inheritance alone?"

"What! Not on your life—"

"It would be—safer," Millpont said gravely.

"Yeah, you mean you'd bump me off before I could make a claim at all, huh?"

"Hardly that—but calamities befall all of us sometimes. You are a business man, and so am I. Strategically Mars is worth as much as your estate if you will communicate with the Venusian Government. They are anxious to buy."

"Boloney!" Hal said frankly. "You mean it's an old hulk and you are glad to get rid of it! You've gotten all the minerals you want, sucked it drier than a lemon—"

"You still have these machines," Millpont shrugged. "I am willing for you to have everything on this planet in return for your silence concerning your legal claim."

Hal hesitated, glanced at the girl. She closed one eye solemnly.

"Okay," Hal said briefly. "I'll do it."

"Good!" Millpont motioned his waxen faced secretary and he went to work on a portable printer. Within a minute Millpont held forth a printed transfer of sale, signed it with a flourish. Hal did likewise and the other men appended their signatures.

Millpont smiled gravely.

"You are not a very good business man, my friend," he sighed. "However, now it is done it is your—"

"I haven't finished yet!" Hal retorted, as the group turned to go. "I've something to add. Now I own Mars—to which you are all witnesses—I intend to buy Merica as well!"

"You—what?" Millpont asked deliberately.

"How much do you want?" Hal demanded. "Name a price! Any price—as high as you like!"

"You're crazy," Millpont said sourly. "Besides, there is no price! All the gold reserve in the Solar System could not—"

"In a world given over to financial domination everything has a price!" Hal shouted. "Take a look at this if you doubt my capital!"

He nodded to the girl and she slammed the switch on the transmutational machine. Millpont, indeed all the men, watched with popping eyes as blocks of lead, copper, tin, iron, and so forth fell forth to the rack as pure gold.

"What the—" Millpont gasped. Then he burst into a roar. "By God, this is trickery! Damned, infernal—"

"I'm the business man, Millpont, not you!" Hal grinned. "Now you see! Mars is an old hulk, is it? The richest planet in the System, that's what it is! Wealth without end—And I own it! Gentlemen, you are my witnesses! I can outbuy Millpont here, outbuy anybody!"

"We'll see if you will!" Millpont shouted, then before anybody could stop him he plunged forward and drove his fist through the glass into the transmutation chamber, grabbed at the lead block forming slowly into gold.

Almost instantly he staggered back, dragging his apparently numbed arm clear. In some odd way the gold block was cloying to his fingers, spreading a yellowish tinge into his hand—assimilating with his flesh! For a second or two he stood in mute anguish while the others looked on, thunderstruck. Then he crashed over to the floor, rigid, his whole gross body twisting and shuddering tremendously as the transmutational powers surged through him.

"He's—he's turning into gold!" one of the men whispered.

"It's the energy that does it," the girl said quietly. "He tried to seize it at the point of change and the energy of change passed into him as well. This transmutator changes anything into anything. Millpont loved gold, I guess—and he sure got it!"

The others were silent, staring at the gilded image cloaked in a suit upon the floor.

"I think, gentlemen, the issue is decided for us anyway," Hal said quietly. "We had better return to Earth and make our arrangements. Mars henceforth is the master planet. I do not have to tell you that no domination will be sought—"

He caught the girl's arm as she came up. She smiled at him.

"Sure was a lucky day for me when I bought Mars," he murmured. "Only day to improve on it was the one when I met you."

"There's still one more to beat them both, if you like," she said naively, then they turned together and followed the Earth delegates out of the hall.

The End.

Solar car—A car assumed to utilize the power of the sun, this power operating from a central plant and distributed to all Vehicles. The idea exists today in the minds of scientists.—Ed.

Space Tunnel—A space "gang plank" entirely inclosed, extending from airlock to airlock of adjoining ships—folding up concertinawise when not in use.—Ed.

Heavy Water—Produced by electrolysis, especially solar power passing through tenuous atmosphere. Heavy water possesses more electrons than normal water, is an isotope. Its powers, according to science, are mainly medicinal and produce different results according to dosage.—Ed.

[The end of *The Man Who Bought Mars* by John Russell Fearn]